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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a project of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Project Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations (Project DeSeCo). DeSeCo was designed to complement past and current international comparative assessments by providing theoretical and conceptual foundations for the continued development and interpretation of indicators of education and learning outcomes. The project was initiated in 1997 and carried out under the leadership of Switzerland with major support from the United States and Canada. The work program began with an analysis of projects related to indicators of competencies conducted in the 1990s in OECD countries. A main activity was the identification of theory-grounded sets of key competencies by scholars form a number of disciplinary perspectives complemented by comments from a historical perspective and fro policymakers and representatives of leading social and economic institutions. In addition, a country consultation was organized within the OECD to review national experiences in definition and selection of key competencies and issues related to the development and assessment of competencies. An overarching frame of reference was developed for key competencies. In addition to other activities, DeSeCo has established a network of researchers with an interest in key competencies. (Contains 55 references.) (SLD)

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Highlights from the OECD Project Definition and Selection Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations (DeSeCo)

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OECD defines key competencies from an interdisciplinary and policy-oriented perspective

Highlights from the OECD Project Definition and Selection Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations (DeSeCo)

Invited presentation at panel discussion - Improving the Assessment of Adult Competencies: An International Context. Adult Literacy and Adult Education Special Interest Group (SIG), AERA 2003

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What competencies are relevant for an individual to lead a successful and responsible life and for society to face the challenges of the present and future? What are relevant criteria for defining and selecting a limited set of key competencies? Questions such as these were the starting point for the OECD Project DeSeCo (Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations; www.deseco.admin.ch).

DeSeCo was designed to complement past and current international comparative assessments, in particular the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and the Adult Literacy and Life Skills (ALL) survey (Salganik, 2001) by providing a theoretical and conceptual foundations for the continued development and interpretation of indicators of education and learning outcomes.

The project was initiated in late 1997 and carried out under the leadership of Switzerland with major support from the United States and Canada. Its work program started with an analysis of projects related to indicators of competencies conducted during the 1990s in OECD countries (Salganik, Rychen, Moser & Konstant, 1999), and a commissioned expertise about the concept of competence (Weinert, 2001). A main activity of DeSeCo's work program was the identification of theory-grounded sets of key competencies by scholars from a number of disciplinary perspectives (Canto-Sperber & Dupuy, 2001; Goody, 2001; Haste, 2001; Kegan, 2001; Murnane & Levy, 2001; Perrenoud, 2001; Ridgeway, 2001) complemented by comments from a historical perspective (Carson, 2001) and from policy-makers and representatives of leading social and economic institutions, including unions and business organizations (Rychen & Salganik, Eds. 2001). In addition, a country consultation (Trier, 2003) was organized within the OECD to review national experiences in the definition and selection of key competencies and issues related to the development and assessment of competencies.

Two international symposia were held to provide an opportunity for reflection and dialogue among the research community, policy analysts and policy-makers at the national level, leaders in social arenas and representatives of international

organizations, the first in Neuchâtel in October 1999, and the second in Geneva in February 2002.

- The various contributions to the DeSeCo Program and the elaborated findings which are published in *Defining and Selecting Key Competencies* (Rychen & Salganik, Eds., 2001), *Key Competencies for a Successful Life and a Well-Functioning Society* (Rychen & Salganik, Eds., 2003), *and Contributions to the Second DeSeCo Symposium* (Rychen, Salganik, & McLaughlin, Eds., 2003) constitute relevant source and reference material for the continuing discussion about key competencies and for future research and development in this field.

An overarching frame of reference for key competencies

The main elements of DeSeCo's overarching frame of reference are includes a well-defined concept of competence and key competence, a normative framework, and three theory-grounded categories of key competencies.

A *competence* is defined as the ability to meet complex demands successfully through the mobilization of mental prerequisites. Each competence is structured around a demand and corresponds to a combination of interrelated cognitive and practical skills, knowledge, motivation, values and ethics, attitudes, emotions, and other social and behavioral components that together can be mobilized for effective action in a particular context.

The concept of *key competence* is based on three criteria, namely, that key competencies:

2 contribute to desired outcomes in terms of an overall successful life and a well-functioning society;

3 apply across contexts and domains;

4 and are important to all individuals for coping successfully with complex demands.

Key competencies are viewed as functioning not as independent entities, but as constellations of multiple interrelated key competencies that take on different forms depending on contextual or cultural factors. There is a consensus among scholars and experts (Kegan, 2001; Rychen, 2003) that coping with the demands of modern life calls for the development of a *higher level of mental complexity* that implies critical thinking and a reflective and holistic approach to life on the part of the individual, and is not ordinarily attained until adulthood. Defining and selecting key competencies is not a neutral exercise. Thus, the underlying vision of society and the societal objectives need to made explicit (Rychen, 2003; Gilomen, 2003). DeSeCo has placed the topic of key competencies in a *normative framework* provided by a number of international conventions and agreements (such as The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Rio Declaration on Environment, the World Declaration on Education for All) that put forth desirable goals for social reform.

DeSeCo constructed three broad categories of demand-oriented key competencies: interacting in socially heterogeneous groups, acting autonomously, and using tools interactively. Within each category a number of key competencies that are deemed to be particularly relevant today are highlighted. Key competencies in the category *interacting in socially heterogeneous groups* are: relating well to others, cooperating, and managing and resolving conflict. In the category *acting autonomously*, the identified key competencies are acting within the big picture or the larger context, forming and conducting life plans and personal projects, and defending and asserting one's rights, interests, limits, and needs. The key competencies in the category *using tools interactively* are using language, symbols, and text interactively, using knowledge and information interactively, and using technology interactively.

DeSeCo's overarching conceptual frame of reference serves multiple purposes. First, it constitutes a basis for a common, coherent, and international discourse on the issue of key competencies (Gilomen, 2003; Owen, 2003). Second, it offers a basis for situating domain-specific empirical studies in relation to the outcomes of learning and teaching in a broader normative and conceptual context (Murray; 2003). Third, it has the potential to focus and make more productive future initiatives related to key competencies, most significantly the development of a comprehensive strategy for data collection and analysis (OECD, 2002; Schleicher, 2003). Fourth, beyond assessments and indicators, the results of DeSeCo can provide valuable input to discussions of policies and programs for enhancing key competencies for all (Rychen & Salganik, 2003; Oates, 2003; Gonczi, 2003). Finally, DeSeCo has established a network of researchers with an interest in the issue of key competences, a constituency that can contribute - from different perspectives - to the substantive and sustained research on key competencies.

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http://www.statistik.admin.ch/stat_ch/ber15/deseco/deseco_symp99.htm

DeSeCo Symposium, Geneva, February 11-13, 2002:
http://www.statistik.admin.ch/stat_ch/ber15/deseco/deseco_int02.htm

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